

# **INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL PROBLEMS IN INTERNATIONAL ADVERTISING**

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## **Introduction:**

In an increasingly interdependent world, the importance of international communication can hardly be overestimated. We may assume that, beyond simply 'getting our own way,' it connotes things like fostering amicable international relations, developing business, trade, tourism and other sought of exchanges.

The flow of information across national and cultural boundaries is produced by human organized actions. One of the most important information system thus by far, being the least discussed, is international advertising; the international marketing communication.

By and large, international advertising and marketing have received increasing attention in recent years. Advertisers in the United States and other countries have talked about widely the degree to which advertising ideas and materials created in one country can be used in another. To quote Eric Elinder, Head of a Swedish advertising agency, "Why should three artists in three different countries sit drawing the same electric iron and three copywriters write about what after all is largely the same copy for the same iron." (Advertising Age Nov. 1961; p. 91)

They believe that appeals, messages or other features of advertising need not be changed from one market to the other. Their observation is that, in many respects, consumers are similar everywhere and that human nature is basically the same in most societies. Men require satisfaction to their physiological and psychological needs.

However, on the other hand, it can be argued that there are indeed real differences that we cannot afford to ignore. The most obvious and least understood is that of the intercultural aspects. Therefore, this paper attempts to look at (i) the problem confronting advertising overseas and to describe and relate how cultural beliefs, languages, values influence the perception of the foreign consumers toward the advertising messages, (ii) cultural problems that involved international advertising messages like the usage of symbols, advertising concepts, appeals and strategies, ideas and creativity, and (iii) conceptual and methodological issues and suggest some considerations necessary for a cultural approach to international advertising.

## **Understanding Intercultural Communication:**

Whether the world is shrinking or is there a global village, we cannot deny that cultural differences exist. Since communication is a fact of life and has a powerful force in basic social arrangements of living, understanding both communication and culture is a vital part in understanding intercultural communication.

Defining communication is a difficult task due to the complexity of the subject. Therefore, our definition of communication is more to a general view, in order to accommodate the discussions in this paper. Communication is defined here as the process of using signs and symbols to elicit meanings in another person or persons. It may be intentional or unintentional, but it has occurred when one person assigns meaning to the verbal or nonverbal act of another. Also, considering communication as transaction will emphasize the concurrent, as well as the sequential exchange of code elements among the participants (Sarbaugh 1979; p. 11).

Communication includes all kinds of behavior. As Herbert Schiller (1976) concluded that communication includes much more than messages. It also defines social reality (Desousa 1982; p. 14). Therefore, we cannot separate communication from culture for, as we start to talk about one we are almost inevitably talking about the other, too.

Hence, culture here is a synthesis from several resources - encompasses psychological, sociological, and technological aspects. It is all that one inherits from one's ancestors. It is the common sets of beliefs, behaviors and artifacts within and outside that group (Sarbaugh 1979; p. 12).

Therefore, speaking of intercultural communication, is to examine what happens when two or more cultures come together, and what occurs at the point of intersection between the cultures can be called communication. As what Dorothy Pennington (1985; p. 31) said, "intercultural communication is not so much the idea of cultural entities coming together and merely alternating in their influence upon one another; it is, rather, the transactions that occur at the point of intersect."

#### International Advertising:

Terms like 'international', 'multinational' and 'export' has cause several amount of confusion when applied to advertising. But whatever the confusion it may be, it is evident that all of them can be included under the umbrella of 'international' advertising, because they involved the use of advertising in a foreign market.

Much international advertising is done by multinational corporations. What is meant by multinational corporations is that, one that has its major headquarters in one country and manufactures and markets in many other countries. International advertising also includes activities of many firms that provide services for international advertisers - agencies, research firms, media etc. In Malaysia, for instance, there are quite a number of U.S. advertising agencies. To name a few, J. Walter Thompson, Ogilvy and Mathers, McCann-Erickson, Leo Burnett and many others.

Advertising's size and scope are usually measured in term of dollars spent. To have an idea of the drastic growth of international advertising, let examine the world advertising expenditures in 1980;

**Table 1: Advertising Expenditures around the World (1980)**

Region	Total Expenditures (M US\$)	Per Capita Expenditures (US\$)	Per Cent in each region
U.S. and Canada	52,612.3	214.48	54%
Europe	26,740.5	76.60	27
Asia	10,525.3	8.26	11
Latin America	4,154.7	12.14	4
Australia and New Zealand	1,925.7	110.04	2
Middle East and Africa	1,531.9	3.92	2
Total World (86 countries)	97,490.4	37.20	100%

Source: *World Advertising Expenditure, 1980.*

By 1980, United States advertising agencies were billing more advertising outside the country than they did in total in 1950. In 1980, the three largest U.S. - based advertising agencies; Young & Rubican, J. Walter Thompson and McCann-Erickson, had approximately 57 per cent of their world billings of over \$6.2 billion outside the United States (Dunn and Barban 1982; p. 18).

Recent development in international relations with previously 'closed door' countries, also contributes to the future growth on international advertising. As an example, China Central Television (CCTV) has acquired 64 hours of programming from CBS Broadcast International including sports, documentaries and drama. The one year deal includes five minutes of advertising per hour from ten U.S. companies (AMCB Nov. - Dec. 1984; p. 8).

If you happen to read a German or Japanese magazine, or if you watched television in any of these countries, you would probably be surprised at how many American products you saw advertised. 'Hottu Doggu' (Hot Dog) and 'Orenji Juisu' (Orange Juice) is common in Japan. Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's and Coca-Cola is nothing new to the Malaysian market. You can see many American products are being advertised almost in all possible media. Such advertising bears dramatic testimony to the internationalization of advertising and promotion.

The arguments for the internationalization of advertising vis a vis adapting to local needs, often forwarded the dangers and pitfalls of international advertising.

International advertising is not going to be as simple as the previous years. In Malaysia, for instance, according to a market research agency, Frank, Small and Associates, the lack of relevance in advertisements created for the Malaysian market is one of the biggest problems facing the advertising trade. Their testing of advertising concepts in Malaysia unearthed the fact that the most unfavorable responses were directed at message comprehension and relevance in advertising. This was attributed to the 'western orientation' of advertising concepts, leading to 'international themes' being copied 'word for word' (AMCB Nov. - Dec. 1984;). As a conclusion of the research, there are two major problems that lead to the issue, which can be summed up as, (i) the non-recognition of the problem, and (ii) use of research only if it conforms with the advertising agencies' hypotheses.

Recently, advertising has come in for regulations, actual or attempted, in many countries. Austria, for example, children are not permitted to be used in commercials. The interesting thing is that some advertisers have resorted to hiring dwarfs and showing animated drawing of kids instead. Malboro cowboy has been sidelined altogether by stiff regulations in Britain. Lately, there is a push, in particular to restrict ads for cigarettes, children's product, liquor and pharmaceuticals in some countries. As Doyle Dana Bernbach, an ad agency, noted that a Panadol ad lost much of its selling power when the Singapore government required the headline to be watered down to "Panadol relieves headaches." (Alsop & Abrams 1986; p. 247)

Nationalistic policies are also curbing advertisers' freedom. Much of the reason have to do with the question of values, with the imported ones being seen to constitute a form of cultural invasion. Due to this, the International Advertising Association had recently formed a global commission on product marketing intended to head off more government rules by encouraging advertisers to regulate themselves.

#### **Cultural Problems in International Advertising:**

There are indeed real differences that we cannot afford to ignore where international advertising is concerned. One of the outstanding problems; the most obvious and least understood is that of the intercultural aspects. Therefore, to understand cultural problems in international advertising is a crucial and vital part of a successful international marketing system.

To quote Dr. Miracle (1968):

While human nature and the motives of men are more or less universal, the ways in which man satisfy their needs are not. The nature of need satisfaction is determined

by cultural and socio-economic conditions. Since such conditions are not the same in all countries, it may be argued that products, appeals, illustrations and other advertising features used to sell them often must differ from market to market. (MSU Business Topics, 1968)

Adding to this, Barbara Feigin, an executive vice president at Grey Advertising Inc. USA gave her piece of mind, "The whole idea has been oversimplified by some people. There's not a simple answer for every company and every brand in every single country." (Alsop & Abrams 1986; p. 245). These cultural differences that affect international advertising can be clearly seen in factors of language, values and beliefs, symbols and advertising appeals, concepts and creativity.

#### Language:

It is assumed that the major problem in intercultural communication is that of language differences. It is also widely believed that if everybody speaks the same language we would have least problems of misunderstanding. But in reality, it is not so. There are thousands of different languages being spoken throughout the world.

As being stated by Sapir (1929), "language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various item of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often naively assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative, symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired with-out its help but actually defines experience for us. (Condon and Yousef 1975; p. 171)

In international advertising, the most obvious and least understood is that of language. For example, there are a lot of differences between England and the United States although they speak the same language. It is not just the difference between tongues, but that of idiomatic nounces that should concern the advertising men. Therefore, the real understanding of the idiom and language usage of a foreign culture should be one of the first consideration of the international marketers.

There are good examples of how wrong usage of language in a foreign culture cause blunders in advertising overseas. An American airline operating in Brazil proudly advertised plush 'rendezvous' in the Portuguese language meant a room hired for love-making. Colgate-Parmolive made an expensive mistake when it introduced its 'Cue' toothpaste in French-speaking countries without knowing that 'Cue' is a pornographic word in French (Martyn 1964; p. 112).

Ford introduced its low-cost 'Third World' truck 'Fiera', which meant 'ugly old woman' in Spanish. American Motors market research showed that AMC's 'matador' meant virility and excitement. When the car was introduced in Puerto Rico, it was discovered that the word meant, 'Killer', which is an unfortunate choice for Puerto Rico which has an unusually high traffic fatality rate.

Another language problem, which is a communication factor, is the constraint by space and time. These have formulated advertising language for itself a style that sounds crisp and abrupt. In linguistics term, this is known as reduced relative clause. This differs for the Malaysian discourse where lengthier sentences were preferred.

In the Malay language, it is less direct in making a point. Directness of expression is considered rude. Directness is than correlated with low breeding. For example, the beauty of a girl was not directly commended with words which mean 'beautiful', but was first compared to the beauty of nature - the moon, the stars, the sun and the flowers (Asmah Hj. Omar 1985; p. 16). This differs from American English where directness in expression is highly expected.

Another crucial problem in advertising language is direct translation. The tendency of translating international themes of 'word for word' is widely practiced in U.S. transnational advertising. According to Samovar, Porter and Jain (1981; p. 143), translating is far more complex than most people believe. Direct translations are difficult, if not impossible because. (i) words have more than one meaning, (ii) many words are culture-bound and have no direct translations, and (iii) cultural orientations can render a direct translation into nonsensical results. This is definitely true if we look

at the following blundering examples of translating directly from one language to another.

General Motors made an embarrassing mistake when in Flemish, 'Body by Fisher', translated as 'Corpse by Fisher' (Mazze 1964; p. 15). In a similar case, Pepsi advertisement, 'Come alive with Pepsi' had problem in Germany, due to the translation of; 'Come alive' meant, 'Come Alive out of the grave' (Advertising Age 1966; p. 75).

#### **Values and Beliefs:**

Values and beliefs are determinants of all kinds of behavior and attitudes, from simple purchasing acts to religious ideology. According to Rokeach (1973) values are:

an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence (Pollay 1983; p. 71)

For example, in India, differences arise in the very concept of competition. United States marketers are consumer-oriented while Indian business are largely production-oriented. Moreover, there is a peculiar semantic and economic view point attached to many aspects of business life in India which are governed by beliefs. As an example, contracts and legal documents depend upon celestial position of the moon and stars. This behavior is related to the belief that the success of a given venture depends upon forces beyond human control.

The Hindu New Year, Deepavali, is considered an excellent time to do business and the Hindu make it specific point to transact a piece of business on that particular day for good luck. Similarly, the Indian superstitious belief, in so far as business is concerned, is that the first day of the new moon is considered a very bad day as it connotes bad luck.

The cow is a sacred animal to the Hindus in India. It would be unwise for a food-product manufacturer to extol the joys of a beef sandwich or hamburger. Similarly, to the Muslim community, it is dreadful to promote in settings where ham and bacon are shown.

In Malaysia, the rules of decorum as decreed by Islam (the official religion of Malaysia), are more strictly enforced and observed. Fondling in public is tabooed. In Thailand, touching a woman's hair in public is an act of rudeness.

The Japanese disapproved of a direct command such as, 'Do it now' or 'Buy now' but prefer a rather humble approach which signifies politeness. Husbands and wives still lead relatively separate lives in Japan and are seldom seen out together. This social structure involves a rigid set of rules covering human relationships down to the minute detail. Advertising stressing 'togetherness' in a public setting could be injurious to an advertiser in such a climate of traditional values.

#### **Symbols:**

Symbols has always been the crucial factor when intercultural differences are taken into consideration. Symbols connote the non-verbal aspect of communication. It is an essential need for international advertisers to understand symbols in foreign culture, as wrong usage of symbols will create misunderstandings and lead to the downfall of international marketing.

In Asia, for example, colors give a lot of meanings and implication. Not to exaggerate, colors are indeed a vital factor to this part of the world. In China for instance, light and bright colors are only used by the younger while plainer and deeper colors by elders. Yellow has always been the imperial color though it symbolizes cowardice to Americans. As a large population is illiterate, symbols play a very important role in relaying an advertising messages.

In Malaysia, the color green is considered unacceptable as it connotes illness and jungle. Green is also the nationalist color of Egypt and Syria and is frowned on for use in packages. To the Hong Kong Chinese, red is a lucky color while black symbolizes death. In Japan, the combination of red and white



is widely regarded as appropriate to happy, bravery and pleasant occasions. Brown and grey are disapproved colors in Nicaragua. Purple is generally disapproved in Latin American markets because of an association with death.

Every culture has its own symbols; some are drawn from mythology while others may be of national significance. Symbols like hieroglyphics, conveying nothing unless the public can identify with or meaningfully relate to them. The more the audience can refer the symbols to their own experience, the more likely the copy is to communicate (Dunn and Watson 1956; p. 50).

This could be seen in the Malaysian Airline System (MAS) logo that relates a traditional image to modern living. The Kelantan kite (known to many as 'Wau Bulan'), a beautiful Malaysian artifact was adopted as Malaysia's symbol of controlled flight. The trademark of Japan Airlines, the crane, symbolizes longevity; 'living a thousand years', and is revered as being very lucky. The 'Tai' fish or seabream; a large pink colored fish, also is regarded as lucky in Japan.

#### **Appeals, Concepts and Creativity:**

Appeals, concepts and creativity are the important elements in portraying advertising messages. Although appeals, concepts and creativity can be universally accepted in some cultures, but yet it is still fraught with discrepancies and incongruities. As an example, in France, the suggestion that the use of a certain toothpaste will help prevent dental cavities is likely to be less effective than in the United States. This is because Frenchmen are not inclined as Americans to be concerned about the number of cavities in their teeth.

Kellogg's Pop-Tarts failed in Britain because toasters are not used widely. The continued popularity of clothlines in Europe and Asia meant small demand for fabric-softener sheets used.

Another example is breakfast cereals that was marketed in Italy, than ran into a head-on and expensive collision with tradition. This is because, cooking is done at home not in the factory as Italians are noted being the world's best cooks. Hence, it is axiomatic that products must be suited to the local market and appeals.

A good example of discrepancy in creativity is a situation that is considered unique that happened in Thailand. A well known marketer of eye-glasses initiated a campaign to promote its spectacles (Carson 1967; p. 3). To attract attention, advertisements and billboards showing a picture of animals wearing eye glasses were used. Despite the apparent charm of the portrayals, sales failed to materialize. The marketers only belatedly discovered that Thais regarded animals as a lower level of creation and were unattracted to advertising using animals. An advertisement comparing people to animals also run the risk of being offensive to an Arab (a beast is a beast, and a man is a man). Therefore, to some cultures, the use of animals to illustrate human behavior may not be attractive even though understandable.

Another interesting example is of Canon. They found that in advertising 35mm cameras in the US, it had to appeal to people who are fearful about complex technological products. On the other hand, many Japanese consumers seek sophisticated, high-tech products. In the US, "Tang" by General Foods Corp. successfully positioned it as a substitute for orange juice at breakfast but discovered later in France people drink little orange juice, and almost none at breakfast.

As an example of advertising concepts, Esso advertisements is appropriate to relate here. Despite its successful campaign in Europe, Esso's universal concept, 'Put a tiger in your tank', did not work in Thailand as the tiger is not a symbol of strength and power and the campaign consequently was not understood, let alone failed.

#### **Recommendations:**

As what we saw, thus far, a lack of understanding of cultural problems in different cultures may lead to bad business. Nevertheless, brand names like Kodak, and 3M are marketed world-wide, yet they

manage to identify with the national and regional practices where they are locally advertised. This appears to be the critical ingredient for the success of a global advertising campaign.

To my opinion, the agencies that involved in international advertising should create an understanding of global marketing benefits at the local level with the understanding and consideration of the cultural problems that involved. Three fundamental questions should be asked and answered as a mark for the conceptual and methodological framework of a successful international advertising and promotion:

- (1) Are the market development and competitive environment at similar stage from country to country?
- (2) Are the consumers market targets similar, and do consumers share the same wants and needs around the world?
- (3) Is there a continuum between complete extension and complete adjustment of advertising in the international contexts?

As a strategy, that can be taken into consideration, the proposal made by Jagdish N. Sheth (1978; p. 140) seems appropriate. These are, (1) complete extension, (2) symbolic extension, (3) literal extension, (4) symbolic and literal extension, (5) simple adjustment, (6) symbolic adjustment, (7) literal adjustment and, (8) complete adjustment. Application of all these strategies must be dependable on a clear understanding of intercultural differences. Researching and understanding is a crucial factor in adapting the suggested proposals.

#### Conclusions:

Communicating to people in diverse culture is one of the great challenges in international advertising. As messages move from one culture to another, communication is more difficult. This is so, partly because cultural factors largely determined the ways various phenomena will be perceived. If the perceptual framework is different, perception of the message itself, obviously will differ.

Thus, in order to communicate effectively in foreign markets advertisers must fully understand the foreign culture. Hence, the key to successful effective campaigns is to identify and be fully aware of differences in point of view and sensitivities to culture norms and traits. Only then, some of the pitfalls in advertising by international companies could be reduced.

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